



# Central Peninsula Church

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## When Tragedy Strikes

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

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We live in disturbing times, don't we. Every day we are reminded of this. We hear of natural disasters - of earthquakes, hurricanes, and tsunamis—that rip through people's lives in a seemingly random and merciless fashion. We hear of violent acts—drive-by shootings, drug overdoses, sexual attacks, racial conflicts and terrorism. Perhaps we ourselves have even been victimized by acts of violence in a playground setting or through an alcoholic family system. All of these forces must remind us that the world in which we live is, often, not a very safe place. I can remember clearly the Loma Prieta earthquake as if it were yesterday, though it's been more than 16 years. I'm not sure why this particular tragedy strikes me so, other than the fact that it was so close to home. It often seems so easy to look the other way when people are victimized in other parts of the world. But when tragedy strikes our neck of the woods it tends to capture our attention.

October 11, 1989, was one of these times. A few days prior I had been transported in a little Cessna from Susanville Prison to the San Jose County Jail. For those of you who don't know me personally, I had a pretty lengthy prison history before the Lord took this donkey behind the woodshed and smacked me upside the head with a two-by-four. And though I wish the first chapter of my life had begun on a more positive note, I have few regrets today. I'm grateful to God, and eternally so. But even the flight down to San Jose was marked by ominous signs; a foreshadowing, if you will, of things to come. As we were flying over the northern central valley the plane ran out of fuel. What made it worse was that I was waste chained and ankle shackled. Not that there was any place to run or hide, but at least the use of my hands could have quieted my moaning! The plane sputtered and dipped and eventually landed on a little airstrip outside of Ukiah where we were then able to refuel. Once in San Jose I was housed in a state custody wing on the fourth floor of the jail. Over the next couple of days I forgot the plane incident entirely and quickly settled into the monotony of jail house living. And then it hit! You know, there's something about tragedy which gives us that rare opportunity to live totally in the moment. In that second all hell broke loose—as if the entire building was suddenly on roller skates. The lights dimmed as my adrenaline surged. The sound of alarms echoed through the hallways as steel doors slammed shut. The very concrete which kept me isolated from the world began to

sway and groan, as if it had a life of its own. Then as quickly as the quake mounted, it subsided, trembled even; only to mount again as new tremors ripped through the earth beneath me. I don't recall how long this went on. I was too frightened to check the time. But I remember wondering, afterwards, how I survived it all. As the days passed and we were able to watch the reports I became mournfully aware of those who had been caught up in the destruction. And with each passing day I grew more fearful about the possibility of aftershocks. Angrily I began to question God's role in all this. Where was God when tragedies strike? Did He cause it? Was He too busy with His e-mails to stop it? How could He have allowed this to happen? I think many of us today have these same kinds of questions. Wouldn't it be great to have a direct line to God so we could begin to make sense of our concerns in times like these?

Well, in somewhat different circumstances there were some people in Jesus' day who did just that. They had an opportunity to ask Jesus personally what He thought about the tragedies that were happening in that day. And so this morning we are going to look at Jesus' answer as part of considering how we ought to think about disaster when it strikes. Turn with me to Luke 13 starting in verse 1. **“Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And Jesus said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will likewise perish’”** (vv. 1-5).

Prior to this section in Luke's gospel, Jesus has been speaking about the coming judgment of God. He has been warning people that they needed to be prepared to meet God in eternity; that each person would eventually give an accounting before Him personally, and that they should repent in preparation for that experience. So it was in the midst of these questions about judgment that this group brought up these tragic experiences. And I think we can break them into two categories.

The first we can call a violent act. Apparently what had happened was some men from Galilee had

gone to Jerusalem to worship. And at the command of Pilate had been slaughtered as they were in the very act of sacrificing animals to God. As a result their own blood became mingled with the blood of the animals they were sacrificing. What a terrible tragedy! This would be comparable to a group coming in here with uzzis in the midst of our worship service. Those who survived would be left to consider the question, "How could this happen? Is nothing sacred?" I think situations like this must remind us of many we hear about in our society. It's not unusual to hear about innocent groups of people being victimized. Last year, in the United States alone, there were over four million reports of violent crimes. Four million! Even after Loma Prieta there were reports of those who entered people's homes posing as inspectors to rob mainly the elderly. Many of you watched the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina after it decimated New Orleans recently. After the majority of the people had been evacuated, a faction of those left behind succumbed to widespread looting and violence. Violence and things of this sort have always been a part of human society. So it really shouldn't surprise us. But I think the sense of outrage we often feel doesn't stem from the fact that violence has always been a stitch in the fabric of our humanity, but from the deeper questions it raises. "Where is God in the midst of this? Why does He allow this to happen?"

Then Jesus mentions a natural disaster that had occurred. The tower of Siloam was built inside the southeast portion of the Jerusalem wall near the pool of Siloam. Apparently there was some structural failure, and the tower suddenly came crashing down on the crowd. Once the dust settled and the bricks were removed, some 18 bodies were recovered. Some commentators speculate this may have been the result of an earthquake though we can't know for sure. Now, opposed to some senseless act of violence, this is an example of those who have been caught up in a natural disaster. And when lives are impacted by forces beyond our control we become traumatized. After the initial shock of Loma Prieta passed and I saw first hand the destruction, I experienced this sense of trauma. I became hyper vigilant to the slightest movement or noise. My days became marked by indescribable sorrow, sleepless nights, that numbing mixture of anger, helplessness, denial and confusion. What do you do with these kinds of feelings? Well, if our own lives and the lives of our loved ones are spared we are naturally grateful. Yet we may still feel a little twinge of guilt because we survived while others were not as fortunate.

Then there is the utter randomness of it all. How maddening to think why this would happen at a particular moment in time. After Loma Prieta there

was a story of a man who left his home in the Marina district to go for a bicycle ride along Crissy Field. Twenty minutes later the quake hit. When he returned he found his house collapsed, his wife seriously injured and his 3 1/2 year old baby boy dead. How can this happen? Why are some spared while others are not? It all seems like some cruel joke; as if our names are drawn in some indiscriminate fashion. Accordingly, if our number comes up on the cosmic roulette wheel then we're out. And if it doesn't then we're still on the board, hoping to survive the next spin. I struggled with this whole process in the days that followed Loma Prieta. It just didn't make sense. And I'm sure that many in Jesus day probably had the same concerns when they considered what was happening around them.

### **I. TRAGEDY IS NOT NECESSARILY THE RESULT OF GOD'S JUDGMENT.**

In response, the first thing that Jesus says is what befell these victims was not the judgment of God. Death happens. Tragedies come. Unthinkable things befall even the most godly and committed. But ever since the days of Job people have believed that the greater the sin the greater the calamity—that there's a direct correlation between the two. This is how Job's friends counseled him. They asked, "Is it because of your reverence that He reproves you, that He enters into judgment against you? Is not your wickedness great and your iniquities without end?" We can also see this same idea in the case of the blind man, when the disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parent that he should be born blind." Do you see the assumption? And Jesus replied, "It was neither that this man sinned nor his parents but it was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him." Jesus then proceeded to heal the man of his blindness. So Jesus is clearly saying that this is not the case. God didn't just herd the worst sinners within range of that tower in Siloam and collapse it in order to judge them. That's absurd! In the same way, God didn't lure the most magnificent sinners to the Bay Area and then shake the ground beneath them. But those in Jesus' day came up with this explanation because it provided an attractive way to evaluate those who had been spared - namely themselves. Certainly their goodness, their moral superiority had shown true! It was all so very neat; so self-satisfying. So they concluded that the victims must somehow be guilty before God and that tragedy was, therefore, God's judgment on "those" sinners. Of course, this left little room for compassion for any of the victims. In those days, and even in our culture today, when someone is victimized we tend to question whether or not they had something to do with it. Tell that to some college coed who has just been raped at a fraternity party by football jocks. So Jesus lets them know, in no uncertain

terms, that they shouldn't think of these victims as worse sinners. He wasn't denying the fact that sin sometimes brings tragedy and there are examples in scripture of God doing so. But He flatly refused to partner with the idea that all tragedy is due to the sins of its victims. Those who died were just run-of-the-mill sinners, like all of us. So physical disasters, like physical advantages, are no indication that those who experience them are any worse or better than their fellow man. Before God, the playing field is leveled for all of us.

## II. TRAGEDY SHOULD RESULT IN OUR OWN REPENTANCE BEFORE GOD.

The second thing that Jesus tells them is that tragedies should result in their own repentance before God. He's saying, "view this as a wake-up call or you too might perish." Now, I don't hear that as one of the most affirming responses in history. But I think there is good reason why Jesus is taking a hard line here. And it has to do with the attitudes of the people who were questioning Him. They were looking for loop holes. They were in danger of rejecting Him as Messiah. Jesus was offering them an out through repentance, one they were refusing to take. In their denial they were saying, "Oh, I get it. These people who were killed are an example of God's judgment of the wicked. Thank God that's not me!" In response Jesus asks two questions - "Do you really suppose that these Galileans were the greatest sinners in all of Galilee? Do you really think that those in Siloam were worst sinners than those in Jerusalem?" Jesus was being abrupt because they were assuming He was talking about someone else. So He nailed them. And as we know Jesus rarely told people what they wanted to hear. Sin was not just some tragic little problem for those Galileans who had been slaughtered or those who had been buried under the tower of Siloam. Sin was, and is, a universal problem with death as its consequence. So in a sense Jesus is saying, "If I were you, instead of being filled with pride and arrogance, I'd be concerned with my own backyard because if you don't repent God's judgment awaits you too." Only repentance provides a bridge between a tragic death and a new kind of life.

I couldn't help thinking this morning about the 20,000 who perished as a result of the earthquake in Pakistan a few weeks ago. The 7.6 tremor leveled a community of about 125,000, knocking down schools, crushing cars like soda cans and turning the main shopping bazaars into a maze of rubble and spilled goods. There were a reported 2.5 million who had been left homeless, vulnerable to disease and exposure in the mountainous regions of Kashmir as they awaited medical help and provisions. And during this interval of time each of them was faced with an eternal decision. Those who were already Christians had nothing to fear. But those who had yet to accept the salvation that Christ offers were in the

process of perishing. None of us can possibly know, can we, how much forbearance God allows. So Jesus is saying that there is no time to repent like the present. We really can't afford to wait until tomorrow or after lunchtime today because all that's guaranteed is now.

Oddly enough, and even in our Christian culture, repentance is a much misunderstood word today. For many, it conjures up images of breast beating or a life of self-denial in sackcloth and ashes. The biblical meaning, however, is far less theatrical. Repentance simply means to change direction, to reverse the course of our lives by turning away from sin and towards God's grace. This reversal occurs, initially, in the mind, which recognizes the intolerable cost of sin. But where the reversal touches the mind but not the heart, the despair of sin deepens. We all know people who keep their repentance on a surface level through intellectualizing it. But repentance is not an intellectual equation to be solved but a life or death decision to be applied at heart level. We must have a change of heart! This is reflected in a deep sorrow for sin coupled with the awareness that sin - whether personal or social - is at heart sin against God. Although a repentant heart certainly grieves over the cost of sin, there is a healthy sense of guilt and conviction that intends to have a positive effect by changing character and habits. Finally repentance requires a decision of the will; to take responsibility for our choices - both past and present - and seek a new life of forgiveness. This in turn leads to nothing less than a revolution in the inner man. And as Jesus is saying, with God's judgment in view, timely repentance is a necessity.

## III. TRUE REPENTANCE MUST BE DEMONSTRATED THROUGH A FRUIT BEARING LIFE.

The last thing that Jesus tells them is that true repentance must be demonstrated through a fruit-bearing life. One should never presume on the grace of God. And to make sure they got it, Jesus told them a bedside story. "**A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?' And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down'**" (vv. 6-9). The Lord is using a common example of a man who owns a vineyard - one which employs a caretaker whose task is to make sure the trees produce fruit. This is a beautiful picture. The owner is clearly God the Father. The vineyard is the

world. And the fig tree is representative of Israel. So Jesus is challenging His hearers, as He challenges us today, to examine ourselves through the metaphor of the fig tree. From the beginning of creation, God had planted Israel as a fig tree in a world of thorns and thistles. He did this in the hope that His very life would flow through them and thereby draw all nations unto Himself. As expected the fig tree rose above the garden with the entire sky to itself. But its large dense leaves blocked the sun from the vines below, and it drew precious nourishment from the soil. This was expected because of the fruit that it promised. But at this particular point in history, as God's salvation was standing before them in the form of Jesus, the nation had rejected their Messiah and sat among the nation's fruitless. So the owner, arguing from the side of righteousness, commands, "Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?" But the caretaker, who is Jesus Himself, intercedes from the perspective of mercy: "Let me have one more year. Just one more year!" He pleads. "For I will dig around it and mix in fertilizer. I will shake up the ground like an earthquake. And if it bears fruit next year, fine! But if not, let the tree be cut down." This is astonishing mercy and grace. Astonishing because the Lord grants us seasons of grace while He painstakingly does what only He can do to bring forth the fruit of repentance.

The great Puritan John Bunyan saw the caretaker's promise to "dig around" as indicating that its roots had become earthbound. In one of his sermons Bunyan addresses the tree in this way, "Barren fig-tree! See how the Lord Jesus, by these very words suggests the cause of your fruitless soul. The things of this world lie too close to your heart. The earth with its things has bound up your roots. You are an earth-bound soul." Bunyan's sermon goes on as Jesus addresses the owner: "Lord, I will loosen his roots; I will dig up this earth, I will lay his roots bare. My hand will be upon him by sickness, by disappointments, by cross providence's. I will dig about him until he stands shaking and tottering, until he is ready to fall." Bunyan then goes on to explain: "In this way the Lord Jesus deals with the barren professor; He digs about him. He smites one blow at his heart, another blow at his lusts, a third at his pleasures, a fourth at his comforts, another at his self-centeredness. In this way He digs about him. This is the way to take the bad earth from the roots, and to loosen his roots from the earth. Barren fig-tree! See here the care, the love, the labor, and way, which the Lord Jesus, the Dresser of the vineyard takes with you, that you may be made fruitful."

What this tells us is that Jesus, through His Spirit, digs to free us. He pounds on us through life's ups and downs. He pries away and levels the very

foundation of our earthly attachments. And the object of these shakings—these earthquakes of repentance, if you will—is that we might become fruitful. Sadly in our culture we easily fall prey to "cheap grace," one that's unwilling to suffer the cost of true repentance. But any initial movement of the Spirit brings weeping and convicting pain, not growth. It comes to scorch before it heals. It brings humiliation, a bitter knowledge of our unworthiness and an open confession of sin before it restores us to grace. When we truly understand the condition within us that causes us to compromise ourselves and others, we are inescapably made sorrowful. This in turn leads us to a desire to change, to want the righteousness of God in place of our own sinful selves. There really are only two options: we either repent and receive mercy or we harden our hearts and receive wrath. As one anonymous poet wrote:

*There is a line by us unseen that crosses every path,  
The hidden boundary between God's patience and His wrath.  
Where is that mysterious borne by which our path is crossed,  
Beyond which God Himself has sworn that he who goes is lost?  
How far can one go on in sin? How long will mercy spare?  
Where does grace end and where begins the confines of despair?  
An answer from the sky is sent: ye who from God depart,  
While it is called today repent and harden not your heart.*

Loma Prieta was merely a wake up call for me, one among many "love taps" my heart once refused to accept. After the tremors subsided many sat quietly and counted their blessings while others shook their fists. It's interesting that those who screamed the loudest were also those who had done little to prepare themselves beforehand. I know—I was one of them! Two years after Loma Prieta my pride was laid bare by a relentless and yet merciful God, who was bound and determined to get my attention. This happened one day as I was involved in an auto accident. Or, perhaps, it was a predestined appointment. Until then I hadn't any understanding of a graceful God. God was a judge, an eternal scorekeeper. Like all the prison systems that had indoctrinated my beliefs, I assumed He only offered condemnation and punishment, not mercy or grace.

So on this particular day we were driving over the coast towards the vicinity of Memorial Park, when the driver lost his brakes on the downside of the mountain. Imagine my surprise! I was horrified as he pumped on brakes that were no longer working. As the truck gained speed down the windy mountainous road he opened his door and bailed. Now, being in a runaway truck with no brakes and no driver should bring clarity to anyone who assumes life can be managed through self effort. But man is a resourceful creature. Those instincts that cling to our autonomy refuse to die willingly. So I opened the passenger door, stepped out of the cab onto the runner, quickly surveyed the territory believing I could actually control a perfect 3-point landing and tumble to my feet without a scratch. But when I jumped

off the runner, my left leg hit the shoulder of the road at 40 miles an hour and my entire body catapulted over the cliff instead. When I regained consciousness at the bottom of the ravine, I became aware that my body was broken and wrapped around itself like some pretzel. "So this would be my final resting place," I thought. And then I understood that this life was no longer mine; in fact, had never been. I realized that, in God's economy, there were consequences. What an amazing concept! Throughout my life I had denied that fact. And now I was looking face-to-face at mine. And as I looked upon the certainty of death I submitted my life to God in prayer. I asked Him, with a humility borne of my brokenness, to take me . . . I surrendered.

The reason I'm telling you this story is because it's here, in this place of true repentance that, in the words of Roy Lessin, the Lord doesn't give *but* rather "*takes our judgment*, bears our sorrow, tastes our death, triumphs over our hell and seeks to take us captive with the awesome power of resurrection life." The beauty of the Gospel is what we discover when, broken by sin, we turn from the darkness of our own way to the light of Jesus Christ. We don't find a God of indifference who cares nothing about us but a God of compassion and tender mercy. We don't find a God who is distant or unable to reach us because of His holiness but a God who has totally identified Himself with our needs. We don't find a God of wrath who must be appeased but a God who extends His grace and forgiveness to us freely.

Since that time I pay closer attention to what's going on around me as well as the rumblings within my own soul. I've learned that when tragedy strikes it should cause us to pause and reflect on our own salvation. Perhaps this is why the Psalmist prayed, "Lord, teach us to number our days, that we might present to you a heart of wisdom." A heart of wisdom captures each moment as if it were its last. It makes every effort not to leave unfinished business that way. Few regrets for things undone. No forgiveness as yet unspoken. A heart of wisdom communicates gratitude through every loving act - considering each relationship a gift not to be taken for granted, that tomorrow is never guaranteed. Are you grateful this morning? In a world that totters on the edge of disaster at every turn I pray you are alive to the presence of God's grace. His mercy and long suffering. Why? Because His judgment lies in the balance.

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